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SUBJECT: MBEKI MUM ON CALL FOR 3RD TERM AS ANC PRESIDENT

Classified By: Ambassador Eric M. Bost. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. With only eleven months to go until the ANC national conference, the succession battle is beginning to be played out publicly. Earlier this month, Mbeki was both heckled by pro-Zuma supporters in KwaZulu-Natal and "encouraged" to run for a third term as party president by Eastern Cape ANC provincial structures. Though Mbeki has said publicly he will not run for a third term as President of South Africa, he has yet to comment on the ANC Presidency. It remains to be seen whether Mbeki's silence reflects serious consideration of a third term or political maneuvering to ensure he has enough support to pick and choose his successor. END SUMMARY.

MBEKI'S GETS EASTERN CAPE ENDORSEMENT

12. (C) On December 3, the Eastern Cape branch of the ANC, which traditionally holds the largest voting bloc, adopted a resolution at its provincial conference "encouraging" Mbeki to stand for a third term as President of the ANC. (Note: Eastern Cape is considered the heartland of the ANC and is also Mbeki's home province.) The Center for Policy Studies' senior political analyst Aubrey Matshiqi told PolOff on December 6 that the resolution was never discussed in plenary and caught many delegates off-guard. The resolution was passed shortly after former Eastern Cape education MEC Stone Sizani, a staunch Mbeki ally, was named ANC Chairperson for the province with 56 percent of the vote.

MBEKI HECKLED; ANC OVERREACTS

13. (C) This moral boost for Mbeki was in sharp contrast to the caustic reception he received the day before at the December 2 reburial memorial ceremony for ANC hero Moses Mabhida in KwaZulu-Natal. Hundreds of pro-Zuma supporters disrupted Mbeki's eulogy by trying to walk out of the stadium. Upon realizing that the gates were being locked, the crowd began singing Zuma's trademark song, "Bring Me My Machine Gun." Though Zuma tried to quiet the crowd by asking everyone to show the President respect, this fell on deaf ears. (Note: In September, Zuma supporters walked out on Mbeki at Durban's Kingsmead Stadium during the Indian Prime Minister's visit.)

14. (C) In addition to locking the gates once the ANC realized people were trying to leave, ANC Secretary General Kgalema Mothlante announced the next day that those who tried to walk out on Mbeki would be "barred forever from any activity of the ANC...like skinheads who disrupt soccer matches in Europe." During a December 6 roundtable on current political

events, Professor Sipho Seepe, Academic Director of the Henley Management College, spoke about how the ANC's strong response demonizes the right to dissent. He also stressed that the ANC needs to learn how to listen to, tolerate, and manage differences of opinion. This theme of intolerance has been repeated to PolOff by both Claire Benit, Senior Researcher of the Human Sciences Research Council who has studied local government structures since 1994, and Raenette Taljaard, former MP of the Democratic Alliance and current Director of the Helen Suzman Foundation, who both feel that the ANC is becoming increasingly intolerant of dissent.

LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS NOT CLEAR-CUT FOR EITHER CAMP

15. (C) Numerous press reports have interpreted both events as a victory for pro-Mbeki supporters, who believe ANC provincial structures are now one step closer to controlling the outcome of succession next year. The Eastern Cape is traditionally the largest party voting bloc and therefore has a disproportionate influence. (Note: Eastern Cape had 655 voting delegates at the 2002 national conference; the next largest voting bloc was KZN with 393 votes.) Matshiqi also argues that the heckling incident seriously damaged Zuma's credibility because it reinforced the idea that "only uneducated hooligans" support him.

16. (C) While these events may have strengthened Mbeki's position, by no means do they guarantee his success in winning a third term, should he seek it. The Eastern Cape provincial endorsement is the first quasi-official endorsement for Mbeki. Zuma already has received unequivocal endorsements from the national ANC Youth League, Youth Communist League, and the KZN ANC provincial executive committee. Sizani's slim victory also has been taken by some to signal growing support for Zuma in the province. If true, the Eastern Cape is likely to go to the national conference fractured, as was the case in 2002 when delegates spoke out against each other while voting for NEC members. When Mothlante was asked whether or not ANC unity in the Eastern Cape was possible, he refused to answer by saying, "I don't want to speculate whether any block will survive beyond this conference." (COMMENT: Mothlante is widely viewed to be backed by the pro-Zuma camp as a compromise candidate. END COMMENT)

MBEKI'S SILENCE LEADS TO WIDESPREAD SPECULATION

17. (C) Although Mbeki has said clearly and publicly that he will not seek another term as President of South Africa, he has not spoken out about the possibility of retaining the party presidency. His silence is fueling speculation that he is amenable to the idea. Taljaard told PolOffs December 13 that she believes it is a "possibility" and would be a way for Mbeki to avoid being a lame duck and to control his legacy. She speculated that Mbeki's eventual decision would depend on what else Mbeki was offered, noting the limited options available to former presidents on the continent. (COMMENT: If Taljaard is right, the crux of the problem is timing since any offers that come Mbeki's way are likely to arrive after next year's ANC national conference and closer to the end of his Presidential term. END COMMENT)

18. (C) Mbeki's silence also has unleashed numerous negative editorials, which point out that there is no shortage of political talent in the country. During the December 6 roundtable debate, Professor Xolela Mangcu, visiting fellow at both Witwatersrand and Harvard Universities, told the audience that those calling for a third term were "playing with fire" and that the perception of a powergrab could create "an ethnic backlash right in the bosom of the ANC." Though many believe that a third term for Mbeki would instill a sense of security, Mangcu argued the opposite would happen.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) With only eleven months to go until the ANC national conference, the succession battle is beginning to be played out publicly. Securing support from provincial structures is the first big step in the process, and the race is on. It is unclear whether Mbeki's silence reflects serious consideration of a third term or political maneuvering to secure sufficient support to be able to handpick his successor.

BOST